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Dame Sheila Quinn

by Professor Francis Davis

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Grand but humble, perfectly groomed yet ready to muck in anywhere, Dame Sheila Quinn was a nurses' leader and innovator who made an invaluable contribution to her profession across the world. She was also a Catholic who, as a young woman, consecrated her life to God as a single person. She became a Consecrated Virgin, renewing her vows each year in the international shrine of Lourdes.

Her childhood in Blackpool was unhappy. An older sister died aged 16 when Dame Sheila was nine, and her mother died seven years later after a battle with depression. Not content with administrative jobs, the Second World War finally crystallised a vocation to nursing. While training at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary (1943-45), she was elected chair of the student nurses' section of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). So began a lifetime's calling to defend nurses and the vulnerable.

From 1961 to 1970 she was on the senior team, finally becoming leader of the International Council of Nurses (ICN). A global umbrella body of the world's national nursing associations, the ICN helps to develop the capacity and training, and defend the human rights, of those in the often-at-risk- nursing profession. Dame Sheila was, in effect, leading a huge NGO with outstanding diplomatic reach and thousands of members. Its work was critical to national development efforts and she travelled tirelessly. Notable among those with whom she led tough negotiations was Haiti's tyrannical president, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, himself a physician.

In the 1970s she was chief nursing officer at Southampton University Hospital and then joined the European Standing Conference on Nursing. The latter's task was to develop the pan-European profession, most especially the sharing of educational and professional standards that would enable the facilitation of free movement of nursing staff.

Dame Sheila held a number of other senior nursing roles culminating in her presidency of the RCN from 1982 to 1986. In this role she famously clashed with the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who took advantage of a non-political RCN banquet to make an "overly long" speech extolling the Government's health reforms. Throwing away her notes, Dame Sheila firmly but politely articulated the fury of her fellow nurses.

She remained active in retirement. During the wars of independence in the former Yugoslavia, she joined Bishop Crispian Hollis on an international delegation meeting diplomats, Ministers and the then Cardinal Archbishop of Zagreb, Franjo Kuharic. Her subsequent report to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales drew fire from a more Serb-minded delegation of Churches Together in England.

She also collaborated with the future Bishop of Clifton, Declan Lang, to reorganise the Catholic Church on the island of Jersey. This work paved the way for pioneering care of migrant workers and advocacy to the island's parliament of the living wage.

In 1991, as chair of the pastoral council in the big, new Southampton City Centre parish Dame Sheila helped to establish Catholic Home Care, a partnership between the Church and social services that recruited paid home support workers for the vulnerable elderly long before others had even thought of “parish nursing”. Concerned to underpin the project financially she co-founded a social enterprise shop in the city centre whose profits were ploughed back in to this and other local needs.

She also became chair of the pioneering Southampton Care Association, a social enterprise that helped create a thousand jobs from scratch. She worked with her friend, the Queen Mother, to found and grow the Brendoncare Foundation, now one of the largest charities across the south of England for the care of the elderly.

Dame Sheila was awarded CBE in 1978 and made a dame in 1987. In 1993, she was awarded the Christiane Reimann Prize – nursing’s equivalent to the Nobel – for her work on behalf of the international nursing profession. She served as a Eucharistic Minister and, as dementia began to claim her mind, she found consolation in the warmth of those who would bring her regular Communion. After her death, social media lit up with recollections of her kindness.